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Empowerment and Participation in Organized Outdoor Activities

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Abstract

Empowerment is a central focus for much work in community psychology. Yet what constitutes empowerment is commonly problematic, especially in relation to programs for young people. We report outcomes from a case study of a UK program designed to empower young people through participation in organized outdoor activities. Grounded theory analysis of data from program leaders (n=10) identified four themes as relevant to success, namely 1) acquiring skills, 2) increasing self-efficacy, 3) prior community links, and 4) challenges in social participation. Attempts to elicit young people's (n=30) understandings were unsuccessful as they withdrew prior to completing the program. Such outcomes might be taken to indicate lack of engagement and lack of empowerment. On an alternative interpretation, however, lack of engagement might demonstrate participants' power to make meaningful decisions. This interpretation points to the difficulties of attempting to define empowerment in practice and of seeking to assess the success of such programs.

Keywords

Community, Empowerment, Grounded Theory, Participation, Power, Young People

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1. Introduction

The notion of empowerment has become a central focus for much recent work conducted in community psychology. Rappaport's early claim (1981; 1987) that empowerment should be the leading candidate for the title of 'phenomena of interest' for community psychology has been taken up in a wide body of work that has examined the consequences for individuals and for communities of facilitating participation in community-focused activities. In this, empowerment coincides in part with the interests of other writers who similarly argue for the benefits of such participation. For example, researchers have argued that experience of and participation in good social relations is a key element of achieving individual happiness (Haller & Hadler, 2006) and that it can provide individuals with a sense of belonging that promotes positive social identity and beneficial psychological

outcomes (Haslam, Jetten, Postmes & Haslam, 2009). From a community psychology perspective, however, participation and empowerment are viewed not just as potentially benefitting the individual but also as beneficial for the broader community in providing greater opportunities for people to engage as citizens. Participation in community organisations is argued to enhance an individual's sense of control, leading to an increased sense of efficacy or belief in his or her own abilities and belief that he or she can make a difference on a personal level and for those around them (Chavis & Wandersman, 1990; Higgins, 1999; Smith, 1995). For example in a study of voluntary organisations in New York City, Prestby and colleagues (Prestby, Wandersman, Florin, Rich, & Chavis, 1990) found that higher levels of involvement led to increased benefits such as learning new skills, gaining information, helping others, increasing social contact, and fulfilling obligations.

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Although such benefits are to be broadly welcomed, the concept of empowerment is however not without its problems. More recently, the meaning of empowerment has been a matter of some debate with different emphases being given to particular elements, or the relationship of these to each other. Here, we report on the outcomes of a study designed to enhance social participation that led to highly divergent understandings for those involved in promoting empowerment and those who participated in the opportunity provided. In doing so, we consider what lessons can be drawn in considering the meanings of empowerment.

The concept of empowerment is fundamentally based on the notion of power (Nikkhah & Redzuan, 2009). Empowerment is argued to be a process whereby the individual can reduce personal powerlessness and dependency on others by gaining increased control over his or her own life (Anne, 2009). Increased control comes from the acquisition of new knowledge and skills and learning to reflect on these gains (White, 2004). At the level of the individual, evidence suggests that an enhanced sense of personal control, empowerment and self-determination enable the individual to experience power to make meaningful decisions and thus promote personal motivation and well-being (Prilleltensky et al, 2001). Thus, empowerment allows people to create or access opportunities to influence the decisions that affect their lives and, at least to some extent, to control their own destinies by deriving a better sense of how to achieve their own preferred goals (Zimmerman, 1995).

At the same time as seeking to empower people as individuals to gain a sense of control over their lives, however, there has been a growing recognition that these lives are lived out in community and inherently social contexts. The role of context in the opportunities available to people, and the influences on the decisions that are made, have led a number of researchers to argue that empowerment comprises more than an increase in individual attributes such as traditional psychological constructs that include self-esteem, self-efficacy, self-worth, competency and locus of control (Zimmerman, 1990; Perkins & Zimmermann, 1995). Instead, attention has come to focus also on the relationship between the individual and the community within which he or she is located. One way of conceptualising this relationship is to view empowerment as a process or an outcome that is potentially amenable to being addressed at different levels. Rissel (1994), for example, offers a distinction between on the one hand psychological empowerment and on the other hand community empowerment. On this distinction, psychological empowerment encompasses, as discussed above, a sense of greater control over one's life which individuals can experience through group membership, whereas community

empowerment incorporates a raised level of psychological empowerment among community members accompanied by (political) action that leads to a redistribution of resources that is favourable to the community or group in question.

Intrinsic to this idea of community empowerment is a focus on power relations within society and the aim of addressing social inequalities to accomplish structural and personal change. From this perspective, the emphasis extends beyond enabling individuals to increase control over their lives to a broader focus on changing the social and political environment with empowerment being defined as 'expansion of assets and capabilities of poor people to participate in, negotiate with, influence, control, and hold accountable institutions that affect their lives.' (Narayan, 2002, p. xviii). For example, Rissel (1994) argues that processes of psychological and community empowerment operate simultaneously to contribute to the achievement of a psychological sense of empowerment and participation in collective political action. On a similar note, Bergsma (2004) argues that a community is not simply a geographic construct but is rather a group of people who share a sense of social identity, common norms, values, goals and institutions: community empowerment, therefore, requires achievement at the group level. Thus, writers such as Nikkhah & Redzuan (2009) argue that the goals of community empowerment or development are necessarily twofold, first to improve the quality of life of members of the community; and second, to involve all members of the community in the process of community action that will effect change.

While the distinction between psychological empowerment and community empowerment allows for action and change at different levels, other writers have argued that empowerment should be understood as a somewhat more relational concept: individual empowerment necessarily involves a social orientation. On this argument, empowerment cannot be neatly divided into elements of personal / psychological empowerment and community empowerment; rather personal empowerment encompasses not only increased self-perception of power and control, but also a greater sense of connectedness to and commonality with others (Rappaport, 1987; Wallerstein, 1992; Bergsma, 2004). Zimmerman & Rappaport (1988), for instance, argue that engagement inevitably involves democratic participation in community life and social issues and empowerment thus incorporates a sense of community belonging and citizenship. For such reasons, researchers such as White (2004) argue that the concept of empowerment, as developed to date, is at best incomplete in that it fails to acknowledge sufficiently or recognise the social orientation of personal decision-making and participation. Furthermore, other writers have pointed to the problems encountered in attempting to examine and

assess empowerment within the community (Laverack & Wallerstein, 2001), especially given that meanings and understandings of empowerment may vary for every person, or every community or indeed fluctuate from context to context (Zimmerman, 1995). Empowerment, then, while potentially appealing to community psychologists as a candidate for the title of ‘phenomena of interest’, might well be most usefully regarded as an inherently plural rather than singular concept as recognised by Rappaport (1987) in his definition.

The problems encountered to date with the notion of empowerment become, if anything, all the more evident when considered in relation to particular groups of individuals. For attempts to engage and empower young people, for example, a common focus has been to secure their participation in sports and recreational activities associated with emotional well-being (e.g. Steptoe & Butler, 1996) with the aim of engendering positive self-concept (Donaldson & Ronan, 2006). Many such projects, and indeed other activities more generally, have however proceeded on the basis of little consultation with the young people at whom they are targeted and a consequent poor understanding of the (psychological and / or community) changes to be sought (see e.g. Ginwright & James, 2002). There has been a tendency also to focus on delivering specific information or skills at the expense of paying little or no regard to broader social and cultural issues (Mohajer & Earnest, 2010). Conversely, programs that have sought to achieve broader changes in democratic participation have found that goals of promoting empowerment have conflicted with participants’ concerns and expectations relating to their participation (Wilson, Dasho, Martin, Wallerstein, Wang, & Minkler, 2007). For such reasons, Mohajer and Earnest (2009; 2010) argue that assessments of the extent to which such programs succeed in promoting empowerment are highly subjective and that ‘no evaluations were available in the literature that implemented the entire model [of empowerment theory]’ (2010, p. 391).

2. Research Significance

Empowerment theory might appear to hold much appeal for community psychology but in theory and in practice is associated with a range of tensions, particularly how empowerment is to be understood at the individual and the social level, and how success is to be understood in relation to specific groups of individuals such as young people. In order to examine further the role and application of attempts at empowerment, we report here outcomes from one UK-based study that sought to engage young people in focused recreational activities and thereby to enhance their sense of

control over their lives and their relationships with the broader community. As will be seen, this attempt produced somewhat different outcomes for providers and for participants. We consider below what these outcomes might contribute to a broader understanding of empowerment for this population.

3. Method

3.1. Design

This study examined in detail one case that comprised a program designed to promote empowerment for young people. Case studies are particularly suited to instances in which diverse perspectives can be applied to the same phenomena in that they allow for the in-depth exploration of the understandings of the various participants involved through the combination of different methods of data collection (Creswell, 2013). The case reported here was a program of organised outdoor activities that were intended to assist young people in realising their potential. It was delivered by a leading UK provider of outdoor learning. This program was designed to be delivered through a series of non-residential and residential sessions and included four activities of canoeing, mountain biking, rock climbing and hill walking. It was organised to run over four phases, comprising ‘recruitment’ (Phase 1), ‘engagement and taster’ (Phase 2), ‘skill development’ (Phase 3), ‘Post Program Support’.

This program aimed to enhance the personal skills of young people from disadvantaged areas, to increase their sense of control over their lives, and to empower them to be active citizens within their communities. Utilising a case-study approach in the present instance, therefore, allowed for a holistic investigation that focused on the program instead of its component elements (Yin, 2003) and offered scope for investigation of empowerment at both individual and community levels and the opportunity to explore the links between these. Ethical approval for the study was granted by an institutional ethics committee.

3.2. Participants

There were two groups of participants involved in the program. The first group comprised all members of staff (N=10; hereafter ‘program leaders’) who were involved in the design of the program, or who acted as instructors in organising and delivering the activities to the young people. All program leaders had previous experience of designing and running similar activity programs. The second group comprised 30 young people, aged between 16 and 18 years. They were recruited to take part in the program through contacts with three local (Scottish-based) agencies with

which they already had connections. These agencies made available to local young people opportunities that ranged from drop-in activities to participation in skills-based learning, and service users could make use of any or all of such services as they wished. Leaders of these three agencies had previously identified service users who might wish to participate and / or gain from participation in the program of outdoor activities and, following notification of their interest to the program leaders, these young people had agreed to participate in the program. Both groups of participants were recruited to take part in the research study through researchers' contacts with the program, and consequent contacts with the individuals themselves. Where participants were aged less than 18 years, their parents also provided informed consent for their participation in the research.

3.3. Data

The ten program leaders participated in a focus group discussion conducted in a local centre around the end of the 'engagement and 'taster' phase (Phase 2) of the program. (At this stage, all the young people had engaged with the program and were regularly attending activity sessions.) The program leaders' discussion was loosely organised around topics related to their expectations and experiences of the program and those who participated in it. Participants were able also to introduce and discuss topics that they considered to be relevant. As well as introducing topics for discussion, the facilitator used probes and back-channeling where appropriate to enhance depth and flow of the discussion and to ensure that it provided data that reflected rich detail of the participants' understandings of the program. The discussion lasted approximately one hour and was audio-recorded and thereafter transcribed.

The resulting data were coded and analysed in accordance with recognised principles of grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Grounded theory is an inductive approach to data analysis that aims to generate theory from close inspection of qualitative data and thereby to produce an account of participants' understandings in their own terms. Here, this approach was especially relevant given that empowerment and related notions can be conceptualised in somewhat different ways, as discussed earlier. Rather therefore than introducing any assumptions as to what empowerment and the outcomes of the program might be, the use of grounded theory allowed close examination of the understandings of those involved on their own terms. Here, the transcript of the discussion was initially coded for indicators of meaning relating to the relevant issues. These indicators were grouped together and developed into emerging themes that were then examined for fit against the whole data set. Themes were further developed and reworked

as necessary, leading to a final framework of four themes that provided best fit for the participants' understandings.

We aimed to collect data relating to the young people's participation in the program and their experiences of it by using the technique of photovoice. Photovoice was developed by Wang and Burris (1997) as a method for increased empowerment and participation and has previously been used as a research method to collect data about children's and youths' experiences (Fitzgerald, Bunde-Birouste, & Webster, 2009). Importantly for purposes of the present study, it had been found to be effective as a means of generating genuine participation of children and young people in community and social projects (Warne, Snyder, & Gadin, 2012; Wilson et al, 2007). In the present study, at the beginning of the 'recruitment and taster' phase (Phase 2) of the program, we issued these participants with disposable cameras and logbooks for recording details of the photographs that they took. The young people were instructed to take photographs of any aspects of their participation in the program that they found especially meaningful, to record relevant details, and once the cameras were finished to return these to the researchers for developing along with their logbooks. The developed photographs and accompanying descriptions would thereafter be used as the bases for semi-structured interviews to be conducted with a sub-sample of the participants.

4. Results

We now turn to the outcomes of analysis of the data collected from the program leaders and the young people who participated in the program. As will be seen, the results obtained from these groups provide highly divergent understandings of the program.

4.1. Program Leaders

Analysis of the program leaders' discussion focused on their understandings of the program and of what participants had gained and would gain from it. This analysis led to the emergence of four main themes, namely 1) acquiring skills, 2) increasing self-efficacy, 3) prior community links, and 4) challenges in social participation. We discuss each in turn below.

4.2. Acquiring Skills

A main aim of the program was to allow young people better to fulfil their potential through participation in organised outdoor activities. Such participation was intended to equip them with new skills while also enhancing skills that would increase their employment prospects. Unsurprisingly, therefore, the acquisition of skills comprised a main theme in

the program leaders' discussion, as seen below.

Even little things like communication, they've actually started to replying to texts, I mean we do still have to text them 10 times, and text them Sunday nights, because they live day by day, who knows what they'll be doing the next day, and they tend to enjoy a wee drink at the weekend, so they forget. But that's picking up. (Tom) The tangible skills that they gained would have been the structure of the day, having to be at a certain point at a certain place at a certain day, with equipment, ready to go. They had to get their lunch before they turned up in the morning, so they knew they had to do that, be ready. It's a very low end in terms of personal preparation but it's an important skill to have in terms of being prepared, and from an employer's point of view, they want people that are prepared and can look after themselves and be in a certain place at a certain time. (Jack).

In these extracts, we see two of the participants discussing perceived changes in the young people's skills during the program that far. It is interesting to note that here the participants are describing specific communication and organisational skills, and that neither participant refers to skills related to the activities in which the young people had been involved. The emphasis instead was very much on the acquisition of skills that were considered to be relevant to employability, for example the 'tangible' skill of being prepared as seen in the extract above from Jack. In this way, the skills were understood to have developed during the course of the program but not from the specific content of that program. Participants' descriptions of particular instances also focused on acquisition of transferable rather than activity-based skills.

There was a young lad that was afraid of the water, we talked him into it, and he came out. So that worked. So I guess if that's an employable skill as well, then that's quite good, because that's showing that you can be flexible and adaptable to the situation, and open minded. (Ed).

It was different from the norm, 'cause they're used to courses where they just go and do workshops about CVs and that sort of stuff. So I think little things, like swearing, so we could focus on their language, when they were swearing it was like Tourette's, full on Tourette's the whole time. So we were able to focus on what sort of attitudes do you need to display if you're looking for work, interviews – that sort of thing. (Alex).

Here again we see the program leaders discussing transferable skills without reference to any particular skills relating to the four activities. By contrast, the focus is on gains that might be applied to the specific context of employment, whether reflecting the ability to be 'flexible and

adaptable' or 'the sort of attitudes [that] you need to display'. This was a recurring pattern for all participants in the focus group discussion: many participants referred to skills that they perceived the young people to have acquired during the program but in no case did they describe activity-related skills (e.g. learning to canoe). Descriptions such as these therefore suggested that the program leaders were less concerned with uptake of the specific activities that formed the core content of the program, which they had designed and delivered, than with young people taking part in that program and demonstrating that they had gained skills while doing so.

4.3. Increasing Self-Efficacy

The aim of increasing participants' sense of control, or self-efficacy, is central to many empowerment programs. This program was no exception, with program leaders describing changes in the self-efficacy of the young people as a central theme. Here, they perceived the young people to be starting from a low baseline when they first entered the program:

The first day, they were like, "well what do we do now", looking at this authority figure, and "give us some instructions", and "I'm not going to do that because you told me to do it". But now they're up on the same level so they're interacting a bit more, and the more we give them choices and a little bit of ownership over it, the more they respond to that. (Emma).

Above, we see Emma describing a low level of initiative on the part of those involved at the start of the program. The consequence of this was that the young people looked to and expected her and the other program leaders to lead, providing instructions and direction for them. Although Emma does refer to this expectation reducing over time, she does not offer any further details. Other participants, however, did describe the sorts of changes that they had encountered, which indicated how the young people had begun to take more control over their lives. Thus, in the extract below, we see Mike describing how one young person had managed to introduce 'control mechanisms' into her life to deal with negative behaviour.

Like, this individual wanted to work on their behaviour towards others, like not to react as much in a negative way. And I think she put some control mechanisms into that, especially working consistently with myself and [name]. So that was really positive for that individual. (Mike).

In descriptions such as these, the program leaders consistently referred to their roles in facilitating the young people in making such changes. It is equally interesting to note, however, that as with the descriptions considered under the preceding theme above, the participants downplayed the importance of the activities in the program.

For them, it's more about getting them away from the norm, getting them in some sort of structured routine, so they're getting up in the morning and making breakfast, they're taking responsibility for their things and they're tidying up, and giving them some lifestyle structure, rather than actually getting them out in the boats. (Lisa).

But it's also away from the canoeing, "I want to cut down. I only had 6 [cigarettes] yesterday, and I'm going to have 5 today". So it's outside the base that we're working with them, introducing those ideas about healthy eating and healthy living, being active. And it's beginning to seep out into other aspects of their world as well. It's been a challenging, but quite rewarding program so far. (Kate).

Above we see both Lisa and Kate describing lifestyle changes made by the young people, in the form of either developing a 'structured routine' or in working on aspects of 'healthy eating and healthy living'. In both cases, however, the participants emphasise that these changes are separable from activities on the program itself. Thus, Lisa refers to lifestyle changes 'rather than actually getting them out in the boats' while Kate sets out changes as being 'away from the canoeing'. The extent of the changes made, and their tangential relationship to the program activities can be seen clearly in the following extract:

The first time we took them out on Loch Lomond, they scowled at [name] and myself picking up litter from the beach, "oh, I'm not touching that, it's grubby and you're gross" and then we took them out on the residential and we talked about the plastic islands floating in the ocean, and the change in attitude was astounding. They filled up bags and bags of rubbish and actually made a detour to this bush that was covered in plastic bags, and spent about half an hour ripping the plastic out of the bush. And for me, that's the highlight of the whole program, that they made that decision independently. (Sue).

Here Sue describes in some detail the 'change in attitude' experienced by some of the participants, reflected in their actions in tidying up the plastic from a bush. For Sue, this is seen as not just a positive outcome, but in more extreme terms as 'the highlight of the whole program'. More than this, the actions of the young people involved are seen to reflect the changes they had undergone during the program in that they decided to do this tidying up 'independently'. This description, of the young people as acting independently to clean up the environment, stands in contrast to the description of them at the start of the program as being unable to act without instructions from an authority figure. At the same time, however, we should note that what is being described here is presented as being separable from the primary activities of the program. In describing the young

people's actions as resulting from a 'detour', Sue understands their demonstration of independence not as reflecting particular engagement in the program but rather as resulting from them focusing their efforts elsewhere.

4.4. Prior Community Links

As with other empowerment programs, a basic objective of this program was to enhance the young people's links with their local communities through participation in program activities. Interestingly, however, the program leaders described this relationship in reverse: the extent to which young people would engage with the program was seen as largely dependent upon their prior links with local agencies. Where the young people had previously demonstrated commitment to courses provided at the local agencies from which they had been recruited, they were more likely to show similar commitment to the outdoor activities course.

They're being employed by [name of agency] to do a training course, and given pocket money to turn up, and other benefits as well, providing they turned up on the course. And this had a remarkable effect on the commitment that they had to the [name] Course as well, because we had a really good attendance. (Jack).

As we see above, commitment in the form of attendance was therefore more likely in cases where the young people recognised the benefits that they would receive through attendance. Commitment increased also when the young people recognised links between the different programs in what they set out to achieve.

The young people themselves there, however, were really good. I thought their personal commitment to the course was spot on, and their head was in the right place for what they were trying to achieve. It was quite interesting, because these particular young people are going through a period of change themselves. There were so many links between what the [name of program] was trying to do, what [name of agency] are doing for the young people. (Mike).

Previous links therefore were seen as an important part of getting the young people involved in the program. The program leaders, however, also perceived that many young people who had been referred to the outdoor activities program had few or no ostensible links to local agencies. In these cases, the task of getting them to engage with the program was rather more challenging, as described in the extracts below.

As far as I'm aware one of the youth workers just found a group of lads and said 'Do you want to do something?' and they said 'Yeah, OK'. It was literally that conversation that happened, rather than 'Let's find someone who can benefit

from this'. It was very difficult for them to find a particular group within that area. (Kate).

My experience was that those that were engaged on a program with the people that had sent them, it seemed to fit better than the ones that were just straight off the street. That gave them a bit of structure to the day which seemed to make it work better. (Tom).

In these ways, the program leaders viewed some level of pre-existing local engagement as close to a prerequisite for the young people to engage fully with the outdoor activities. More detailed knowledge of the work of local agencies, and greater alignment with their priorities, thereby was seen as a key part of developing the program for the future.

I think learning from it that maybe we could learn a bit about what the actual outcomes are of [name of agency] so we can actually do follow on stuff to complement their program. Even little things like timekeeping, turning up with the right kit, those are the sorts of things that [name of agency] want to instil, just good practice so I think that does complement a bigger program. (Bill).

Thus the success of the outdoor activities program, designed as a stand-alone program with its own structure and aims, became contingent at least in part upon prior efforts of the local agencies and prior community participation of the young people.

4.5. Challenges in Social Participation

Above we saw that the participants emphasised the importance of young people having prior community links. Absence of any such links was seen as problematic if they were to benefit from this program. Community involvement following the program, however, appeared equally problematic. For example, program leaders expressed doubts as to whether young people would be able to continue to participate in the activities that they had taken up. One particular barrier in this respect would be the financial resources required.

It's outside the canoeing skills for me, the transfer, I can't see realistically, financially for them, I can't see a way of handing that transfer over, as canoeing over as a hobby. So for me, it's working out a way of how to link the other skills that they've developed. (Emma).

Other barriers also might preclude the young people from continuing the activities. For example, the environment of a canoeing club or a similar setting was viewed as presenting a challenge with which the young people might not be able to manage without further support. Thus, an attempt to pursue such activities within the broader community might in itself be detrimental to any gains made during the program.

I think that would probably squash any confidence that we've built in them, in the time that we've been working with them, to send them into that environment, with the adults who know what they're doing, even though some of them will be coaches and they'll be encouraging. I think they will find it very difficult to approach that sort of situation without being guided along, and then looked after through the process. (Lisa).

Here, the difficulties that were likely to confront the young people were seen as going well beyond factors that were specific to the activities included within the program. Rather, the program leaders described the obstacles as being determined by broader social forces that reflected wider processes of inclusion and exclusion.

The only thing that was going through my mind just then was this idea of different levels of social beings within society, and for these young people that are currently unemployed or looking for employment. And we're trying to encourage them into clubs where perhaps most of the people that would be in those clubs would be employed, or in a well off situation, whether that in itself, if we were successful to even get them into the club, would create a barrier itself? (Jack).

The program leaders then expressed doubts as to whether, following participation in the program, the young people would be able either to continue with the activities they had been encouraged to take up or to gain access to opportunities for doing so if they wished to continue. These doubts reflected their perceptions of limited possibilities for the young people to engage with aspects of their communities even after full engagement with the program. One program leader described how these constraints and their implications only became clear in the course of delivering the program.

When we worked initially in the first section, and we built up a partnership with the organization that we were working with, we hadn't fully kind of I think earlier on in that phase, we should have started engaging that partnership in where are these young people likely to go next, so we could start engaging their destination partnership people, or what it is they're doing, in terms of helping us to facilitate them remaining in the program. And I definitely think that hindsight is a great thing, but going forward, that would be something that you need to do, in order to ensure that you can release them for programs that they're going in to, but also help somebody keep up the motivation. (Alex).

Thus, the program leaders viewed the social benefits for young people that might result from the program as uncertain. The program was designed and introduced with the aim of promoting young people's engagement as active

citizens by enabling them to maintain their learning and sharing their knowledge and experience with others within their communities. Increasingly, however, during the course of delivering the program it became evident to the program leaders that this aim would be difficult to meet in the contexts of the socially disadvantaged areas in which the young people lived.

4.6. Young People

As described above, we aimed through the use of *photovoice* to gain access to program participants' understandings of their participation and what they perceived themselves as having gained from it. This aim however could not be achieved. During the program (and subsequent to the program leaders' group discussion), all program participants ceased to engage with the program. By the end of the 'skill development' phase (Phase 3), all participants bar one had stopped attending any program sessions. Moreover, the program participants failed to respond to any attempts by program leaders to contact them by various means. The program therefore terminated at that time.

Unsurprisingly, given that the participants had ceased to engage with the program, they also ceased to engage with the research despite the researchers' efforts to obtain their views subsequent to withdrawal. Most participants did return to researchers the cameras and logbooks, but these provided few photographs and comments that were, at best, minimal. No participants responded to requests for interviews. There are therefore no data available that can provide meaningful insights into the participants' experiences of the program. The consequences of this for the present study are considered below.

5. Discussion

On any view, the program examined here failed to meet its aim of enhancing personal skills of young people from disadvantaged areas, to increase their sense of control over their lives, and to empower them to be active citizens within their communities. The young people enrolled on the program as participants did not complete the program, many of them not participating beyond Phase 2 and none of them participating beyond Phase 3 of a four phase program. One immediately available interpretation of their withdrawals from engagement is that inevitably they would not gain the benefits potentially achievable through completion of the program. Thus, in consequence, they would lack the enhanced skills, self-efficacy, and power to participate as active citizens in their communities that they would otherwise have gained.

Yet, the present findings point to a range of the problems

bound up with any such interpretation. Here the views expressed by program leaders, at a time when the young people were actively participating, are somewhat illuminative. These understandings, of the young people's experiences and of the program itself, merit further consideration for what they might tell us about this instance. At the same time, while this represents only a single case of attempted empowerment, the current findings potentially allow for discussion of empowerment more broadly. First, at the level of the individual, the program leaders reported that the young people had acquired employment-related skills and had attained greater self-efficacy. Such gains might at first sight be taken to signify advances personal / psychological empowerment. At the same time, however, the program leaders separate out these gains from the content of their program: the young people gained these skills *while* participating in the program and not *because of* that participation. These gains, therefore, cannot be said to reflect success on the part of the program. Second, in describing the relationships between the young people and their communities, the program leaders emphasized the importance of previous community participation and the challenges that made increased participation following the program unlikely. These understandings stand in marked contrast to the usual expectations of empowerment programs, namely that they will increase people's involvement as active citizens. Here, however, community involvement was presented as a pre-requisite for and not an outcome of participation.

On both levels, these understandings of the program leaders appear to run entirely counter to the expressed aim of a program that sought to enhance the personal skills of young people from disadvantaged areas, to increase their sense of control over their lives, and to empower them to be active citizens within their communities. Regardless of whether empowerment is viewed as comprising personal and community components, or always having a social orientation, dependence upon established links and the expectation that no social gains will follow cannot be treated as indicating empowerment in any meaningful sense. In these respects, the views expressed by program leaders might well be taken to indicate a weak understanding of the changes to be achieved, consistent with Ginwright and James' (2002) argument that many such projects fail to succeed due to ineffective communication with those who are intended to benefit from the program. Moreover, the focus here on delivering specific skills with less regard being paid to broader social issues also points to a lack of effective implementation of empowerment theory (Mohajer & Earnest, 2010). The expressed understandings of those responsible for designing and delivering the program thus surely indicate the extent of the challenges that the project would have to

overcome to meet its stated aim.

What does this mean for the young people who initially participated in the program and subsequently withdrew? In writing about the difficulties arising in studies of youth empowerment and citizenship, Lindstrom (2010) notes that findings from such studies can all too easily become entirely circular. When, for example, those who attend voluntary activities are asked about their attendance, the views that they express are almost inevitably positive: 'how can they, as voluntary attendees, object to their attendance, or complain about staff, or think negatively about what they get from these experiences or activities? If they felt negative, they wouldn't come back or be frequent visitors' (Lindstrom, 2010, p.206). What we see in the present case is potentially the converse, the assumption that outcomes for those who do not return must invariably be negative, or to paraphrase Lindstrom: 'if they felt positive, they would come back'.

6. Summary and Conclusions

What we have seen here is young people's disengagement from a program that, according to its leaders, did not in itself bring about any changes in skills or self-efficacy, relied for any degree of success on the efforts of others elsewhere, and which did not offer much by way of possibility for greater community involvement even following completion. In contrast to viewing withdrawal as indicative of failure, therefore, one could easily argue that it is socially meaningful to withdraw from a program of which the aims are not fully clear initially even to those delivering the program. If not empowerment, a decision to withdraw in such circumstances surely demonstrates power to act in ways that affect one's life and thereby to control one's own destiny. Issues such as this one point to the difficulties inherent in attempts to arrive at any conclusive definition of empowerment and its implications for the individual and his or her relations with society. More than this, they clearly demonstrate the problems inherent in attempting to assess in any meaningful form whether or not empowerment is achieved in any particular instance, without sufficient regard being given to what is count as power in decision-making and for whom. Rather, as Mohajer and Earnest (2009; 2010) argue, assessments of the extent to which empowerment programs succeed are highly subjective, and, tellingly, such assessments might reflect little of the implementation of empowerment theory in practice.

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